

# Dallas visit debunks conspiracy

By **DICK DORAN**

**W**e landed in Dallas at 8:30 p.m. on a cold and rainy late September night. After getting our rental car, we drove down the freeway, past Texas Stadium in the town of Irving.

Irving. That's where Marina Oswald lived with her friend Ruth Paine in the house that Lee Harvey Oswald would return to on the night of Nov. 21, 1963. Getting closer to Dallas, we were guided by a green skyscraper and the indistinct outline of other tall buildings, most of which weren't there three decades ago.

We knew where we wanted to go, even that late on a cold and rainy Friday night. Back in the car, my son Richard suggested a left turn toward the Industrial Boulevard rather than a right to the Stemmons Freeway. The Industrial Boulevard is one of those roads that time and the interstates left behind. Strip joints, back-road bars and bail-bond offices characterized the route, a journey that tourists aren't supposed to make.

Rich, always our dependable navigator, commanded: "Take a left," and then he said: "There it is. Look over there." Patrick, my other son, in the back seat, and I, both looked to the left. "Oh my God," I said. "That's it. It's Dealey Plaza." The place where John F. Kennedy was shot 30 years ago today.

We parked on Houston Street at the intersection of Commerce — street names drilled into my head from the reading of dozens of books and the scanning of endless motorcade maps. We walked up Houston, in the same direction the motorcade took that day (it's all one way in the other direction now), approaching the former Texas School Book Depository, where Oswald lay in wait on the sixth floor, rifle at the ready.

To our left, past a reflecting pool, Elm Street wound down that fateful curve toward the railroad underpass. On the right stood the now legendary grassy knoll, the perplexing wooden fence and the pergola in front of which Abraham Zapruder shot his 8mm color film.

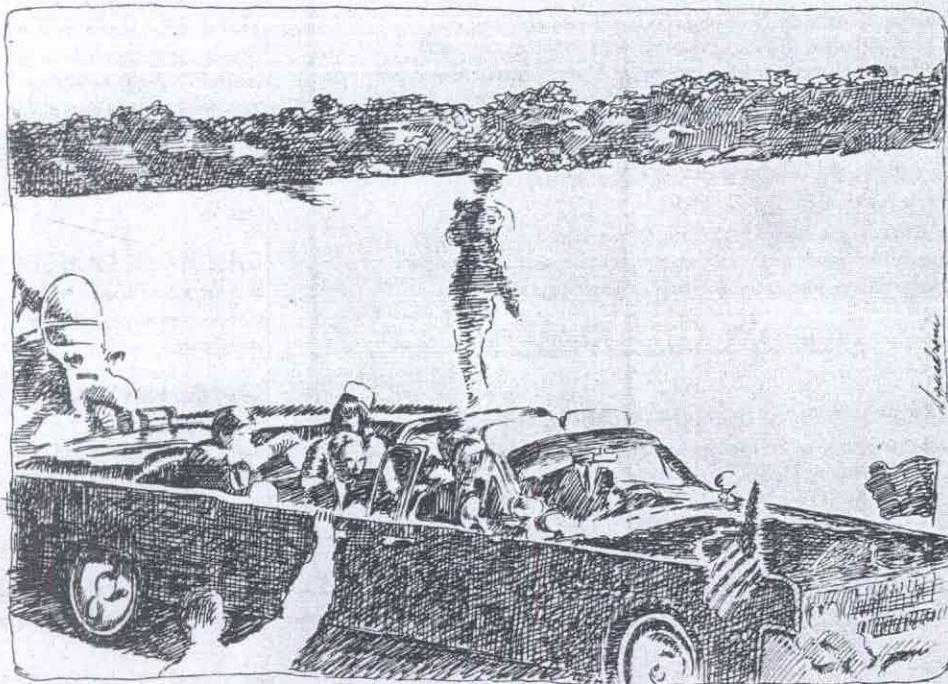
We had come to Dallas to see, and ponder a place that Ken Burns, creator of the public television Civil War series, has called, along with

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## theory — and yet .

Ford's Theater, Calvary and other tragic sites, a "place of sorrow." Despite the dark stillness and rain, we had to see it. And we would be back on Saturday to explore it fully.

"The Sixth Floor," as it is now called, is a tourism bonanza. In 1993, the number of people visiting it will triple into the hundreds of thousands. Its exhibit, which has been called "moving," is not. What is moving is the sixth floor itself. Surrounded by routine pictures and narratives of the Kennedy years and the final day, is that one significant spot that bears the ugly label "sniper's



For The Inquirer / TONY SQUADRONI

nest": the southeast corner window, surrounded by book cartons exactly as they were arranged that day, glassed in to protect it from overly aggressive visitors.

You can't get to the window itself but you can stand directly by the window next to the fatal one and ponder what occurred. You realize how close the rifle was to its target. You can look down and distinctly observe the features of people walking less than a hundred feet away.

*The sixth floor where  
Oswald fired the shots  
has become a big  
tourist attraction.  
And it is revealing.*

Not a hundred yards. A hundred feet.

You feel as if you can practically reach out and touch them. That is how close the rifle was to the head of the man it was targeting. That was the amazing thing. You are literally right on top of the street.

This is no huge warehouse as I had envisioned, a belief reinforced by movies and pictures that give you the impression of a much larger building, a much more expansive space. This is a compact little building in a tight little space.

And all the while you stand there and watch, the exhibit behind you is

playing, over and over again, that first Associated Press radio report on Nov. 22, 1963: "Bulletin ... Flash ... three shots have been fired at President Kennedy's motorcade in downtown Dallas ... bulletin ... flash ... three shots have been fired at President Kennedy's motorcade in downtown Dallas."

Critics of the Warren Commission have questioned how Oswald could have fired his shots, left the window, traveled across the sixth floor, disposed of his rifle and then walked down four flights of stairs to be confronted by a motorcycle policeman in 90 seconds.

Easy. Twice I walked casually across the floor, through the crowds and exhibits, from the window to the stairwell. On one occasion, it took 32 seconds. On the other 29. I asked Rich to do it too and it took him 30.

I felt that, not only was it possible to do it in 90 seconds; it probably took less.

The other notable aspect of "The Sixth Floor" is the Visitor Signing Book. They leave the most heartfelt and emotional messages.

"I will never forget where I was that day."

"Will we ever know the truth?"

"My life changed on Nov. 22, 1963."

"Things were never the same after what happened here."

As the sixth floor seemed to answer questions, Dealey Plaza itself raised them. It is endlessly mysterious and fascinating. It is a compact set designed for a tragedy, exquisite in its ordinariness. And the best thing about it is that it is so ordinary

today. No attempts have been made to alter or glamorize it.

A small plaque at the front door of the Depository recalls its history and, at the bottom, as if to say "Oh by the way," it adds the event that took place there on Nov. 22, 1963. Cars, trucks and station wagons drive routinely down Elm Street, past Houston and head toward the underpass as if nothing particularly significant ever happened there (the matter-of-fact drive takes but a few seconds). Neither Sophocles nor Shakespeare could have envisioned such a perfect backdrop for a monumental event.

For the next two days, we stood at every spot and examined every sight line. It is elusive. It floats in your imagination. When you think you have it figured out, some other aspect of it raises another question.

Standing on Houston Street, looking directly at the Depository, you hardly need look up at all to stare directly at the sixth floor window. Wasn't there a single person in that motorcade who even casually looked slightly upward? What were they all doing? Heading inexorably toward death looking at everything but the building in front of them? And the witnesses who later claimed to see a man, or men, and a rifle, minutes before the murder. Wasn't there a

single one suspicious enough to say "Stop!" The whole thing was right there in front of their faces.

I thought of Auden's poem, "Musee des Beaux Arts," in which he contemplates how great artists can often capture that moment of tragedy in an otherwise ordinary setting.

*About suffering they were never wrong.*

*The Old Masters: how well they understood*

*Its human position, how it takes place*

*While someone else is eating or opening a window or*

*Just walking dully along!*

I thought of the spectators, just standing dully by. The people in the motorcade, driving dully along. Excited by the prospect of waving to the President, perhaps. Pleased by the turnout. But alert? Someone was just opening a window.

And we went over to the grassy knoll. Groups of tourists pointing to the sixth floor. Others trying to find the spot where one bullet apparently ricocheted and grazed the cheek of onlooker James Tague. Some listening to a guy on the steps by the pergola who wore a "Not LHO" t-shirt. Another self-styled authority suggesting we check out the part of the wooden fence where the "man in the big hat" shot at the President. And a bearded, wide-eyed disseminator of tabloid sheets with "the latest research on the JFK assassination." The place had the weirdness and lunacy usually associated with cosmic events.

It was hard to believe that, behind this little wooden fence, right smack next to the pergola, not at some more distant point (as photo perceptions would mislead), a second shooter could successfully fire and escape through a parking lot that is so compact that it is virtually impossible to disappear in it. Everything here is right around the corner. All is without much exaggeration within arms length. Four good footsteps can cover the grassy knoll in two seconds.

And yet, the very compactness lends some credence to those who testified to a puff of smoke, another human figure, or a gun behind the wooden fence. The very fact that it is so close makes you reluctant to doubt eyewitness testimony. They may have been mistaken. But eyewitness at these distances is truly eyewitness.

We found ourselves staring, measuring, contemplating and, in the end, shaking our heads, now more convinced that the obvious and logical conclusion was that all shots came from the sixth floor. And yet.

And yet.

Armed with a map of Oswald's escape route, we got back into the car and followed his movements. Back to the bus he took. The cab he hailed. Into the Oak Cliff section to his roominghouse at 1026 North Beckley, a rather pleasant-looking house no doubt spruced up for the busloads of tourists who seemed to be doing the same thing we were doing. Can you believe it? And then to 10th Street and Patton Avenue where patrolman J.D. Tippit was shot — a rundown a backwater of a neighborhood that, 30 years ago, was probably in far better shape.

Sure, he could have covered the required territory on foot in the amount of time described in the Warren Report. And he could easily have

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### *Oswald's ziz-zag route after the shooting shows panic rather than a plan.*

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found his way to the Texas Theater, a now shabby closed structure on a seedy commercial block where he was ultimately caught by the police.

What we don't know, however, and what we could not figure out, was where he was going and why, if he had any method in this madness at all. Mark Lane claims that Oswald went to the Texas Theater to meet his connection because movie theaters are the classic meeting places of intelligence operators. But the zigs and zags of his movement didn't indicate a deliberate plan to me. They exhibited panic.

On Sunday, we were drawn inexorably once again to Dealey Plaza. We stood on the railroad bridge overlooking the entire scene. Was there somebody behind that fence to our left? If there was, we could have been all over him in a matter of seconds. On the other hand, if somebody on that overpass did see something, chances are his observations were accurate.

Dick Doran is a former city representative and director of commerce. He is now vice president for corporate communications for Independence Blue Shield.

■ Claude Lewis, a Monday columnist, is on vacation.

# What was the Kennedy legacy? He brought the politics of hope

By **JOHN LUBELL**

**J**ohn F. Kennedy changed my life.

He made me an optimist — one who saw hope in the storm clouds, one who chose ideals over the conventional wisdom, one who realized there were no easy answers in life. When JFK joked with reporters at his news conferences, I laughed out loud. When he said we were on the edge of a new frontier, I believed him.

As a youth in search of myself, he inspired me to reach my potential — something he was deprived of. It was his ability to inspire and motivate, combined with a vital life that was cut short, that will make people like me grieve this week, 30 years after that fateful Friday in Dallas.

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My infatuation with JFK began during the 1960 Democratic Convention and continued through the campaign that fall, when I started my college career at Miami of Ohio. I campaigned for him in the company of other novice political activists, including a daughter of Arthur Schlesinger Jr. We went door-to-door in Ohio and Indiana, getting several of those doors slammed in our faces.

When the President-to-be came to Cincinnati (or Cincinnati, as he pronounced it), I hitchhiked the 24 miles from Oxford and saw the man in person. I was impressed. Of course, I was impressionable. But that was part of JFK's appeal: He moved those of my ilk into action, something few politicians have been able to do since.

Later in my college years, this time at New York University, where I decided journalism would be a better career than contract bridge, it was another autumn. Like so many people, I, too, can remember every detail of Nov. 22, 1963 — the weeping TV commentators, the screaming headlines in the afternoon New York dailies, the radio bulletins, the solemn music, the canceled football games, the faces of stunned New Yorkers.

And the next morning, the New

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York Times: **KENNEDY IS KILLED BY SNIPER AS HE RIDES IN CAR IN DALLAS; JOHNSON SWORN IN ON PLANE. And the morning after that: KENNEDY'S BODY LIES IN WHITE HOUSE; JOHNSON AT HELM WITH WIDE BACKING; POLICE SAY PRISONER IS THE ASSASSIN. Nov. 25: PRESIDENT'S ASSASSIN SHOT TO DEATH IN JAIL CORRIDOR BY A DALLAS CITIZEN; GRIEVING THROGS VIEW KENNEDY BIER. Nov. 26: KENNEDY LAID TO REST IN ARLINGTON; HUSHED NATION WATCHES AND GRIEVES; WORLD LEADERS PAY TRIBUTE AT GRAVE.**

The rest is history. Except for a brief fling with Robert Kennedy, I, like so many other young Americans, became estranged from the political process and took a seat on the sidelines. The combination of the assassinations of the '60s and the exodus of the best and the brightest from Pennsylvania Avenue to Wall Street turned me and many other would-be do-gooders off.

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Why was the Kennedy assassination of 30 years ago so upsetting to so many people? James Reston, in a column written at the time and entitled "Why America Weeps," put it this way:

"America wept tonight, not alone for its dead young President, but for itself. The grief was general, for somehow the worst in the nation had prevailed over the best. The indictment extended beyond the assassin, for something in the nation itself, some strain of madness and violence, had destroyed the highest symbol of law and order."

And what is the Kennedy legacy?

Is it that of a womanizing and ineffectual President (a popular theme heard these days)? Or is JFK's legacy that of a symbol of hope, the symbol that inspired me? Ten years ago, in *The Inquirer's* Review & Opinion section, we excerpted portions of a book by William Manchester called *One Brief Shining Moment*. This segment, which was relevant then, is relevant now and I trust will be relevant 30 years from now, goes like this:

"If you were sitting beside Jim Swindal in the Air Force One cockpit during that flight home from Texas on Nov. 22, hurtling eastward at a velocity approaching the speed of sound, goaded by a mighty tailwind, you became aware that night was approaching rapidly. Less than 45 minutes after you left Dallas, shadows began to thicken over eastern Arkansas. In the Southern sky you could see a waif of a moon, a day and a half off the quarter, hanging ghostlike near the meridian. Like you, Jim, near tears, was fighting to control himself. Conversation was out of the question; voices couldn't be trusted. Outside, twilight turned to olive gloaming and became dusk.

"You looked out upon the overarching sky and realized that in the last days of autumn the northern firmament is brilliant. Jupiter lay over the Carolinas, the Big Dipper beyond Chicago. Cassiopeia and the great square of Pegasus twinkled overhead. Arcturus was settling redly over Kansas. But the brightest light in the bruise-blue canopy was Capella, just beginning its annual five-month wintry cruise over the hemisphere. Always a star of the first magnitude, it seemed dazzling tonight, and as Air Force One rocketed toward West Virginia it rose majestically a thousand miles to the northeast, over Boston. Ever since then you have thought of Capella as Kennedy's star. It is brilliant, it is swift, it soars. Of course, to see it, you must lift your eyes. But he showed us how to do that."

John Lubell is assistant Editorial Page editor.